

People are failing! Something needs to be done: Canadian students' experience with the NCLEX-RN



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ABSTRACT

Background: Canada's nurse regulators adopted the NCLEX as the entry-to-practice licensing exam for Canada's registered nurses effective January 2015. It is important to determine whether any issues from this change emerged for nursing students in preparing for and taking this new exam.

Objectives: To explore the experiences of Canadian graduate student nurses who were the first to write the NCLEX examination for entry to practice in Canada, determine whether any issues with implementation were identified and how these could be addressed.

Design: A qualitative study.

Methods: Thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data obtained through interviews with 202 graduate Canadian nursing students was the methodology employed in this study.

Results: The predominant theme that emerged from the interview data was policy related issues that students identified with preparing for and taking the NCLEX. Sub-themes included: a) temporary test centre concerns, b) perceptions of American context and content on the exam, c) lack of French language resources and translation issues, d) the limited number of opportunities to write the exam, e) communication and engagement with regulators, f) financial costs incurred and g) reputational costs for the Canadian nursing profession.

Conclusions: The experiences of study participants with NCLEX implementation in Canada were less than positive. This is of critical importance given the pass rates for first-time NCLEX writers in Canada were reported as 69.7%, substantially lower than pass rates on the previous Canadian entry-to-practice exam.

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1. Background

The Canadian Registered Nurse Examination (CRNE) was employed to measure the competencies required of registered nurses entering practice in Canada (CRNE, 2004, April). The CRNE was a paper-based examination that was available to potential registrants three times a year, and averaged national pass rates of 85% for first time exam writers (CCRN, 2016b, July).

Nursing regulatory bodies in Canada adopted the NCLEX as the entry-to-practice licensing exam for Canada's registered nurses effective January 2015 (College of Nurses of Ontario, 2011). Canadian regulators indicate that they selected the NCLEX because it "...met our requirement for being a valid, secure and psychometrically sound exam that also met the needs of writers, such as year-round access to the exam and faster issuing of exam results" (CCRN, 2015). As this is the first time that the NCLEX has been used to license RNs in a country outside of the US (NCSBN 2014, April 1), it is important to determine whether

any issues may have resulted from this change for nursing students in preparing for and taking this new exam, and discuss how these can be addressed. The objective of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of Canadian graduate student nurses who were the first to write the NCLEX examination for entry to practice in Canada in 2015.

2. Methods

2.1. Aims

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of graduate student nurses who were the first to write the NCLEX examination for entry to practice in Canada, determine whether any issues with implementation were identified and address any inconsistencies.

2.2. Design

A qualitative design consisting of thematic analysis of interview data was used in this study. Qualitative research enables the researcher to achieve rich descriptions of an area; examine unique or unexpected

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events; illuminate the experience and interpretation of events by individuals; give a voice to those whose views are rarely heard; and move toward understanding a complex phenomena (Sofaer, 1999). As the adoption of the NCLEX was a new experience for Canada and no research on it had been conducted before, qualitative methods are appropriate to use in this context. Semi-structured interviews using an open narrative approach provided the opportunity for participants to tell their own individual story (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007; Wengraf, 2001). Thematic analysis allowed for the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns within the data while permitting rich and detailed descriptions of the content embedded within (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

2.3. Participants

The interviews were conducted between July and October 2015 with 202 students who had graduated from 28 different universities/schools across 9 of the 10 provinces in Canada that had implemented the NCLEX exam for entry to practice in 2015. Snowball sampling is often used when study subjects are hard to reach (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Heckathorn, 2002). As there is no method of reaching recent graduates who have completed their nursing educational programs in Canada, a snowball sampling approach was employed through a study notice posted on the website and social networking Facebook page for the Canadian Nursing Students Association. Interested graduate nursing students were invited to respond to the research study email or phone number. All participants included in this study were first-time NCLEX writers, 109 (54%) of whom had passed the exam, and 93 (46%) who were not successful.

2.4. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with graduate nursing students who had written the NCLEX examination for licensure in Canada to determine their experiences with the NCLEX exam. An interview guide comprised of standardized questions aimed at obtaining detailed information about graduate nurses experiences with preparing for and writing the new licensing exam was utilized (e.g., taking the exam at test centres, specific strategies implemented to prepare for the NCLEX exam, perceptions of exam readiness or preparedness, and identification of any issues related to the exam). The questions were pre-tested in a pilot study with five new graduates to ensure they made sense and were not problematic or biased. Two of the authors conducted the in-depth telephone interviews between July and October 2015. Participants were offered the opportunity of having the interview in either English or French as some participants were graduates of Francophone schools.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Health Sciences Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto. Potential participants who contacted the research study team were provided with an information sheet by email outlining the background, purpose, methods and significance of the study and inviting them to participate in the semi-structured interview. Following this, interviews were arranged at a mutually convenient time for those indicating interest and consenting to participate. At the time of the interview, the researchers reviewed the information about the study and ensured the participant wanted to continue with the interview. All interviewees were informed that the findings from this research would be published and presented at conferences and meetings, but that no individual identifiable information would be shared.

2.6. Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and content analyzed by two members of the research team, and codes generated from the data. An inductive content analysis approach was used, where the codes were further discussed and re-analyzed to ensure that consistent themes emerged (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005; Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007). The authors discussed the themes integrating relevant resource materials into the interpretation of the overall study findings. The research team discussed the interviews and the themes emerging from the data throughout the study. Content from the data guided the development of initial codes and the development of the overarching theme and sub-themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This coding allowed for the data to be grouped and sorted into the seven sub-themes that emerged as the researchers reached consensus on the themes that occurred most frequently and were thus representative of overall meaning to study participants (Morse, 2007), thus ensuring rigour in the data analysis. These are presented below, contextualized using examples from the interviews.

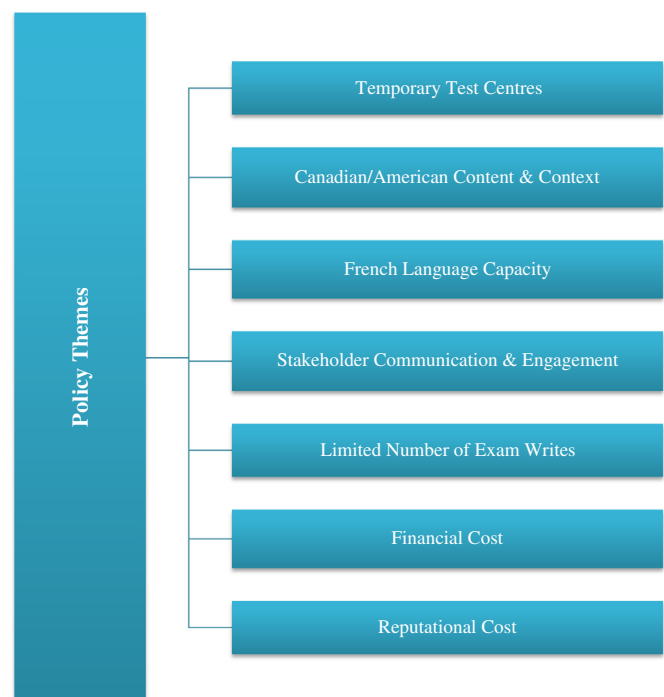
3. Results

The predominant theme that emerged from the interview data related to policy issues that students identified with preparing for and taking the NCLEX. Within this broad policy category a number of sub-themes were identified (see Table 1). Those included: a) temporary test centre concerns, b) perceptions of American context and content on the exam, c) lack of French language resources and translation issues, d) the limited number of opportunities to write the exam, e) communication and engagement with regulators, f) financial costs incurred and g) reputational costs for the Canadian nursing profession.

3.1. Temporary Test Centre Concerns

Study participants provided comments on the organizational arrangements and accessibility of the test centre settings in which they took the exam. Students in larger metropolitan areas in Canada where

Table 1
Policy themes emerging from student interviews.



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